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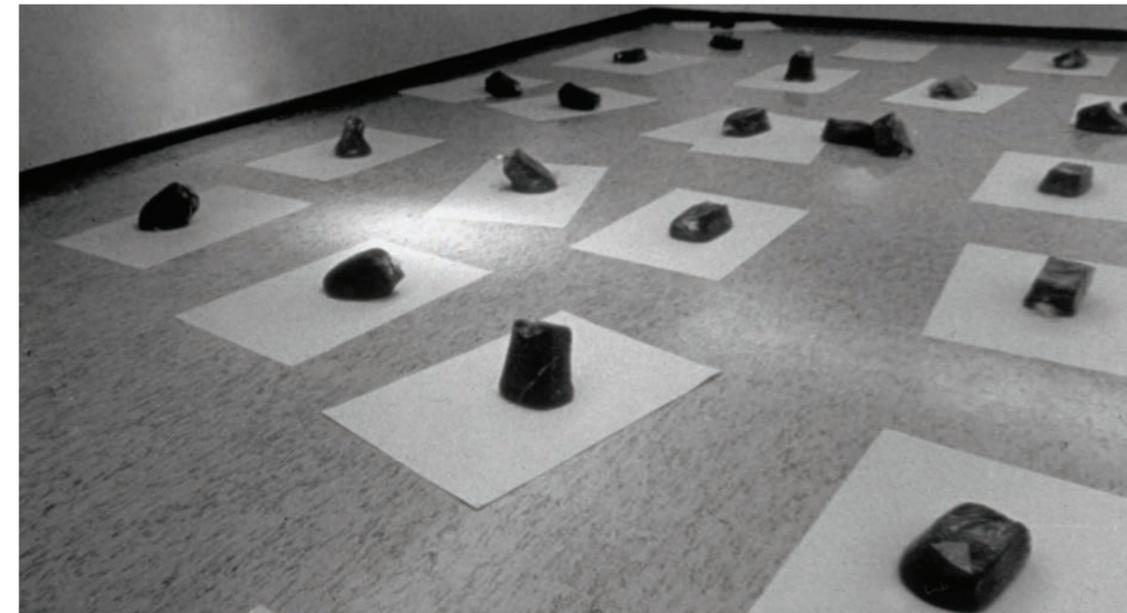
# FLIGHT RISK

## TOM MORRISSEY PILOTS THE AESTHETIC FORM TO NEW HEIGHTS

With minimalist rigor, Tom Morrissey intends his art to be unyielding information that is a jolt to the status quo. He's interested in the "object of art" rather than "art objects" – a perspective that contrasts with Rhode Island's Zeitgeist of design superiority. Stepping confidently beyond conformity to address topical and socially aware subject matter, his statements are difficult, but resonate with pragmatic engagement.

The artist attended Miami Dade Community College for aeronautics, then, at 20, volunteered for the United States Army's Warrant Officer Flight Training Program. He flew 900 combat hours during the Vietnam War and became a decorated helicopter pilot. Upon returning to Florida, he studied art, with his attention focused on clay and photography. Morrissey received his MFA in ceramics at Arizona State University, home of The Ceramics Research Center, a program deeply influenced by the arts and crafts movement. With a seasoned aesthetic quite different from those of his classmates, Morrissey preferred the freedom of conceptual work. He liked going out to a local brick factory for large extruded lengths of clay straight from the assembly line and making these into minimalist influenced action art installations.

Morrissey related to the sensibilities of Christo and Robert Smithson, particularly their innovative approaches toward mixing sculptural practice and the use of photography. Among his mentors at ASU who encouraged him to think beyond pottery toward fine art were Randy Schmidt and Jules Heller. Morrissey explains that they saw he was coming from a different point of experience. He was interested in making large-scale artworks and identified with systems



*Placements, circa 1978-1979.*

and methods that referenced the visual and physical imagery seen in Vietnam; some of his instructors had advised him to leave behind his war experience.

With MFA in hand, Morrissey returned to Florida and took roughly a year off. At the time, Christo was in Florida making his wrapped "Islands" and Morrissey briefly volunteered on that project during its preliminary stages before heading up the East Coast to a teaching position at Community College of Rhode Island's Flannigan Campus.

### COMMON GROUND

Throughout his career, making sense of the public's denial directed toward Vietnam vets has influenced Morrissey's art. It has also made him a thoughtful teacher and mentor to students. In our recent discussions for this article, he talked about being interested in pivotal experiences that shape people's lives.

Staying with the subject of clay for a moment, he spoke about the artwork of ceramicist Victor Spinski, who also served in Vietnam. Morrissey stated that he also identified with artworks by Peter Voulkos who had served in World War II. To Morrissey, given the cultural vacuum about Vietnam, it seemed real that Voulkos had once described combat as a million dollar experience he hoped never to repeat.

### HIGHLY DECORATED

Morrissey's artwork often has a roaming aesthetic. Rather than standing still, he reaches for the next thing, selectively focusing on causes. He has received a Kellogg Fellowship for photography in the Brazilian rainforest. He was a Fulbright scholar in 2003, completing a large sculpture outside Hue, Vietnam, ironically during a year that he also taught at the Art College in Hanoi.

COMMUNITY COLLEGE  
OF RHODE ISLAND  
JUNE-JULY EXHIBITION  
[MORRISSEYARTWORKS.COM](http://MORRISSEYARTWORKS.COM)



200 Tubes Stacked in a Corner, 1978.

He has returned to Vietnam a number of times since the war and has received various grants and awards during his creative career. Morrissey's artworks are included in the permanent collections of RISD Museum, Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C. and the International Center of Photography in New York City. His book, "Between the Lines: Photographs from the National Vietnam

Veterans Memorial," published by Syracuse University Press, documents fellow veterans visiting Maya Lin's Memorial from 1983-1999.

"Approximately 7,642 Pounds of Art Stacked and Somewhat Arranged" is the arching title of Tom Morrissey's retrospective opus, and in the present tense is a continuing series of exhibitions that conceptually confront the value of art and its meaning in the complex social fabric of the world today.

Morrissey's current artwork strongly connects conceptually to Christo's wrapping aesthetic while reaching into pop culture's reality TV idiom to identify with the scenarios of "Storage Wars." He has boxed or crated the entire contents of his studio and places this on display to make a point about the commoditization of art. As an interventionist action, he cages this artwork in a framework of metal chain-link fence with security cameras trained on his property. Without audiences being able to see the artworks

in his installations, only the boxes and crates, his statement encompasses society's whim to marginalize art and artists and draws attention to the value of intellectual property and art as product as well as the subject of fair-trade practices in the arts. He is clearly daring audiences to ponder artists' lives in context.

His opus includes shows unfolding at Community College of Rhode Island and elsewhere in an organization of elements meant to give the artist control over outcome. Morrissey wants to direct our attention to the behind-the-scenes reality for every artist, and he is using his work to literally disrupt the status quo in order to activate broader dialogue. His installations are perplexing, but they are also thought-provoking. Morrissey's ongoing retrospective cycle will delve into the content of some of these boxes as he continues to evolve a challenging style of social commentary.

Suzanne Volmer

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This exhibition is supported by David & Dorothea Jensen and Barbara & Harry Shepler.

Robert Indiana, 1962, *Yield Brother*, 1971, screenprint, 39 in. x 32 in. Currier Museum of Art, Manchester, NH. © 2013 Morgan Art Foundation / Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

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Image: June August, *Tamara de Lempicka Yellow*, silkscreen (detail).

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